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ABSTRACT

Described in this newsletter issue are research activities involving the development in Sweden of an indicator model to provide a holistic and comprehensive depiction of schools. Intended for use in continuous follow-up and evaluation activities, the model attempts to mirror the situation in schools by means of existing information expressed as indicators. In the discussion, motives prompting the development of educational indicators are listed, and progress in developing the indicator model is reported. Concluding remarks provide information about the use of the indicator model to follow the extent of schools' success in transmitting knowledge and skills. (RH)

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SCHOOL RESEARCH

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Knowledge and skills
Evaluation
Measurement

Current Project

TITLE OF PROJECT: PROGRAMME FOR RECURRENT EDUCATIONAL SITUATION
REPORTS: SCHOOL DESCRIPTION MODELS

What do we know about schools? Quite a lot, of course. But at present there is no systematic follow-up of the school system as a whole. The purpose of the present project is to develop models on which to base continuous follow-ups of schools and their activities. This includes paying special attention to the development of knowledge and skills.

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PROJECT NO :

6315

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PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Programme 6315, "Programme for recurrent educational situation reports: school description models", is aimed at devoting models for a continuous description of schools and their development.

The content of the project is best described in terms of the two main activities which have defined it from the very beginning, viz:

1. Development and application of the so-called indicator model, i.e. describing schools with the aid of a number of indicators, and
2. Development of models for studying knowledge and skills and their transformation over time.

The latter activity, concerning knowledge and skills, is an amplification of part of the former indicator model.

THE INDICATOR MODEL

Schools, with their task of training and qualifying pupils for various tasks, affect most people. One way or another, this, coupled with the expenditure schools entail, makes it vitally important for school activities and development to be continuously followed up. This is actually done in several different ways, e.g. internal and external follow-ups through various research projects, investigations and surveys of different kinds, local development projects, professional journals and other mass media, and in many other ways. For natural reasons, however, these measures tend to confine themselves to one or a few problem fields. As a result, the information they yield is also limited. Although it can be exceedingly difficult to obtain a wider and more comprehensive picture of schools as a whole, there is a great need for information of this kind. In the absence of a holistic picture, the individual parts are very liable to be difficult to interpret and understand, or else they lack nuances. Newspaper headlines such as "growing vandalism", "declining standards" and so on are

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liable, when viewed out of context, to have spin-off effects on other fields and activities in schools and quite often convey a misleading picture of schools generally.

Realising the need for a holistic picture is one thing. Producing one, however, is a great deal more difficult. The problems involved by a task of this kind are both numerous and complicated.

The indicator work of this project represents an attempt to mirror the situation in schools by means of existing information expressed as indicators. Many of the ideas underlying this work are derived from the trend towards "social reporting" which has been in progress in many countries ever since the 1960s (cf. Johansson, 1979 and Henriksson & Wedman, 1979) and which are subsequently being emulated in the educational field.

MOTIVES AND REASONS FOR EDUCATIONAL INDICATORS

It is of course important to ask oneself what motives have prompted the development of educational indicators and what purposes those indicators can serve. Briefly, the following motives can be mentioned as important ingredients in the adoption of educational indicators with a view to conveying a holistic picture of schools:

1. Both educational debate and planning with reference to school activities presuppose and are facilitated by an overall picture. One of the purposes of educational indicators is to provide material for such a picture.
2. A democratic society is only democratic in the sense of the general public, i.e. people, being informed in various ways and in a position to appraise and influence events and processes both large and small. Educational indicators have an informative task to perform, i.e. that of informing the general public what is going on, so that it can form opinions about events and processes.

3. Educational indicators furnish good opportunities of indicating bottlenecks or problem areas in need of further investigation. This is where research inputs can play a particularly important part. Thus one can imagine a system of indicators being partly used in the planning of subsequent research. This is not to say that the system is to govern research, but undoubtedly it can provide interesting points of departure. Let us take an example. In our review of compulsory schooling (Wester & Wedman, 1982) we found among other things that large sums of money had been spent on projects dealing with pre-school education and junior level. None of these projects, however, appears to have focused on pupils and their expectations concerning future schooling. Further elucidation of this question should not be altogether uninteresting.
4. Educational indicators can serve the important purpose of equipping school personnel with a tool for their own subsequent training and for assessments of the activities they are involved in.
5. Educational indicators can provide both administrators, decision-makers and researchers with documentation on which to base definitions of priorities and other assessments.

It is all very well to mention these various motives and purposes, but accomplishing a system which measures up to them is quite another matter. The road ahead is bound to be a thorny one.

STATE OF PROGRESS

Our work on the indicator model has so far involved compiling and evaluating both practical and theoretical experience in the field (cf. Henriksson & Wedman, 1979), developing structures for describing both compulsory and upper secondary school with the aid of indicators, and also exemplifying descriptions of both compulsory and upper secondary school with the aid of the structures developed (Wester & Wedman, 1982; Wedman, Granberg, Karpberg & Salomonsson, 1984). The descriptions of

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compulsory and upper secondary schooling thus presented have been based on pre-existing information, taken from a variety of sources. The sources drawn on have included both official statistics and findings and experience from a number of research projects in both types of school. In addition, and in conjunction with our description of upper secondary schooling, we have developed an analytical procedure to facilitate and articulate our interpretation of the great mass of information involved here ("Qualitative matrix analysis").

The models which have been developed in the course of the project, as enumerated above, will be put into operation this year as part of the NBE's obligatory follow-up and evaluation activities. The project team will be contributing to this work, partly by analysing existing test information for some of the two-year vocational lines of upper secondary school. In addition, the project team will be taking part in continuing analyses of the structures which have been devised for indicator information and by testing the above mentioned interpretative model on new upper secondary school data.

The descriptions of compulsory and upper secondary schooling which have been exemplified as part of the project and are now being tested on a larger scale as part of the follow-up and evaluation responsibilities of the NBE are expected in due course to result in recurrent situation reports on both types of school and in this way to become a regular feature of school follow-ups.

FOLLOW-UP OF "KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS"

One of the most important tasks of schools is to transmit knowledge and skills. This task has been assiduously discussed in recent years and many people maintain that it has been neglected, partly as a result of the changes undergone by schools in connection with new reforms. The debate on these problems is echoed in many parts of the world and is not unique to Sweden. The discussion has perhaps been most clearly manifested in the USA, where the development of knowledge and skills in various subjects has been monitored for a long time and a number of

states are in the process of developing and compiling special test programmes to ascertain in detail the extent to which pupils acquire certain minimum levels of knowledge and proficiency. These programmes have been prompted by findings which began to be published in the mid-seventies, indicating a decline in cognitive standards during the sixties and seventies.

In Sweden, questions relating to knowledge and skills have mainly figured in general discussions and articles in the press and other mass media. For example, many articles have been published in recent years claiming that large numbers of pupils leaving compulsory school have a very deficient command of the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic.

One looks in vain for a more thorough description and analysis of the extent to which school objectives regarding knowledge and skills have been neglected. The examples quoted have often been isolated and relatively incoherent.

One important reason for the lack of closer analyses and more thorough reviews of the problem is the absence of relevant information. Apart from standardised achievement tests in compulsory and upper secondary schools, there are no findings on which to base a continuous description or overview of the development of knowledge and skills in schools. This, of course, does not mean that there is no information to shed light on the question of knowledge and skills. But the existing information is for the most part geared to individual research projects, with all the limitations this implies in terms of universality and other aspects. There are, of course, certain major projects yielding information which is rather more substantial and perhaps of greater national relevance than is otherwise the case. Projects of this kind include, for example, IEA and UGU. But not even these projects have been primarily aimed at furnishing documentation on which to base a cogent assessment of the development of knowledge and skills in schools.

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The present project is to be viewed in the light of these limitations, its aim being to develop models for following and describing the development of knowledge and skills.

STATE OF PROGRESS

In order to concretise both the practical and theoretical prerequisites of recurrent measurements of knowledge and skills, we have among other things undertaken a relatively close analysis of two comprehensive international programmes aimed at following knowledge and skills, viz the American "National Assessment of Educational Progress" (NAEP) and the British "Assessment Performance Unit" (APU) (Wedman & Stage, 1980).

From this starting point we proceeded to investigate the possibilities of appraising the development of knowledge and skills in Sweden on the basis of the information available. In doing so we have paid special attention to standardised achievement tests for compulsory and upper secondary school as possible documents to this end (Nordin, Stage & Wedman, 1984). We have also scrutinised examples of local tests and measuring instruments in order to investigate the extent to which follow-up takes place at local level and the instruments used on such occasions. In addition, during the current fiscal year we have made a limited study of teacher and pupil attitudes concerning knowledge and skills.

With this background in mind, we now propose to take a closer look at the theoretical and practical prerequisites for introducing a system of recurrent measurements of knowledge and skills. Work on developing the pedagogical component of such systems, i.e. facilitating interpretations of the results obtained in terms of the teaching and learning which take place in the classroom, will play an important part in this connection.

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